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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement*/ submitted by Reporters without Borders-International, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2001]

*/ This written statement is issued, unedited, as received in English and French from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Burma: twelve journalists sentenced to die in jail

At least four journalists, San San Nweh, Sein Hla Oo, Win Tin and Soe Thein, are currently in a very preoccupying poor health. The Burmese authorities do not do anything to provide the necessary medical care. Since the coming to power of the army, in 1988, three opposition journalists have died in jail under torture or from a lack of care. Burma is, with China, the largest prison in the world for professionals of the press. Twelve journalists are detained in insalubrious cells. Several hundred political prisoners are detained in Insein. The majority of the journalists accused of supporting the NLD were sentenced to heavy jail sentences. Burmese citizens face the same fate when they listen to a foreign radio station, when they have a fax machine without permission or when they use the Internet to spread "subversive" news.

This year, and above all since Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest, censorship has been strengthened. Two publications have been banned for two months for having quoted the names of General Aung San, father of the Nobel Prize for peace, and dissident writers. The censors have forbidden importation of publications mentioning the name of Aung San Suu Kyi. They also prohibited Rangoon media last November from mentioning the 5-0 defeat of the national football team against Indonesia. It is important to note that the most influential leader of the junta, Khin Nyunt, is personally involved in the selection of the team players.

It is furthermore impossible for reporters of the foreign press to work freely in the country. This year at least ten of them have been put onto a black list of foreign journalists banned from Burma.

Burmese journalist San San Nweh, Reporters Sans Frontières 1999 Prize, starts her seventh year in detention

On 5 August 1994 San San Nweh, journalist, writer and political activist, was arrested in Rangoon (Burma) by the military security police (MIS). She is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence for "spreading information harmful to the state" with the aim of "causing trouble". Since her arrest she has been cooped up in a ten square metre cell in the women's wing of Insein prison in Rangoon. San San Nweh is subjected to interrogations by the MIS and to collective harassment. Prison wardens have repeatedly refused to provide the medical care she requires.

According to the latest information supplied by her family, San San Nweh is very weak and is suffering from several diseases: high blood pressure which could cause a heart attack at any stage; arthritic rheumatism that caused an onset of paralysis in 1998 already; kidney infection; and thrombocytopenia (an abnormal decrease in the number of platelets in the blood) that causes repeated haemorrhaging. Prison authorities recently allowed here to go to the prison infirmary alone during the day. This "privilege" enables her to rest on a bed and to have access to certain basic medicines. But the treatment that she must imperatively receive is still refused and she has to sleep in her insalubrious cell at night.

San San Nweh shares her cell with three other persons from the National League for Democracy (LND, an opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1991), Daw San San, elected representative of the LND in 1990, Daw Bo Ma and Daw May

Win Myint. The roof of the cell is very low and there is only a tiny window, so that air cannot circulate normally. Prisoners sleep on bamboo mats on the ground. The toilet – a mud bowl in the corner of the room – is cleared once a day only. From 6 a.m. the women are forced to sit cross-legged on the ground with their heads bowed. Speaking is forbidden and disobedience is sanctioned. San San Nweh does, however, have the "privilege" of being allowed to read religious books. Once a day, for fifteen minutes, prisoners are taken to the "shower" where they are allowed to talk.

In March 2000 San San Nweh's daughter, Ma Myat Mo Mo Tun, was released after serving a five-year jail sentence. They had been detained together for a long time. San San Nweh is still very concerned about her six children, deprived of resources since the death of their father and the imprisonment of their mother. Her family has been making huge sacrifices for the past six years to collect the 180 francs per month needed to take food to her in prison (the average monthly salary in Rangoon is 350 francs per family).

Since August 1994 San San Nweh has been interrogated regularly by members of the MIS, omnipresent in Insein jail. According to a former prisoner, they sometimes go to her cell, put a cloth sack over her head and take her to the interrogation room. According to her daughter, Ma Myat Mo Mo Tun, the authorities regularly propose she sign a document undertaking to give up all LND activities, in exchange for her release. San San Nweh has always refused this blackmail.

According to RSF's knowledge, the journalist has not been tortured but repeated interrogations tire her enormously. Some prisoners bribe the guards to avoid these sessions of "psychological torture".